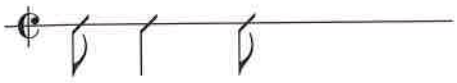
THE MOTHER CELL

In Brazilian music in two beats, we constantly find what can be considered our rhythmic mother cell:

EXAMPLE 14

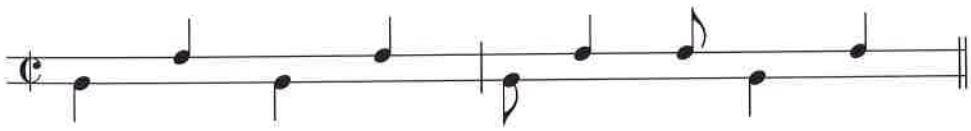
1.



2.

This cell is very important to rhythmic Brazilian music. Found originally in the early Afro-Brazilian styles, it developed in different regions such as the states of Pernambuco, Bahia, and Rio de Janeiro. It is found nowadays in the main two beat Brazilian styles: Samba, Bossa Nova, Choro, Baião, and their predecessor, the pioneer Maracatu.

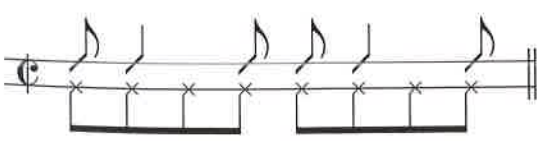
EXAMPLE 15



This cell should be deeply studied and researched in order to be properly interpreted. We will consider it as in reference for timing and accenting.

A classically trained musician would interpret it very precisely, exactly as it is written:

EXAMPLE 16 – MOTHER CELL, CLASSICAL INTERPRETATION (*PA – PA-A – PA*)

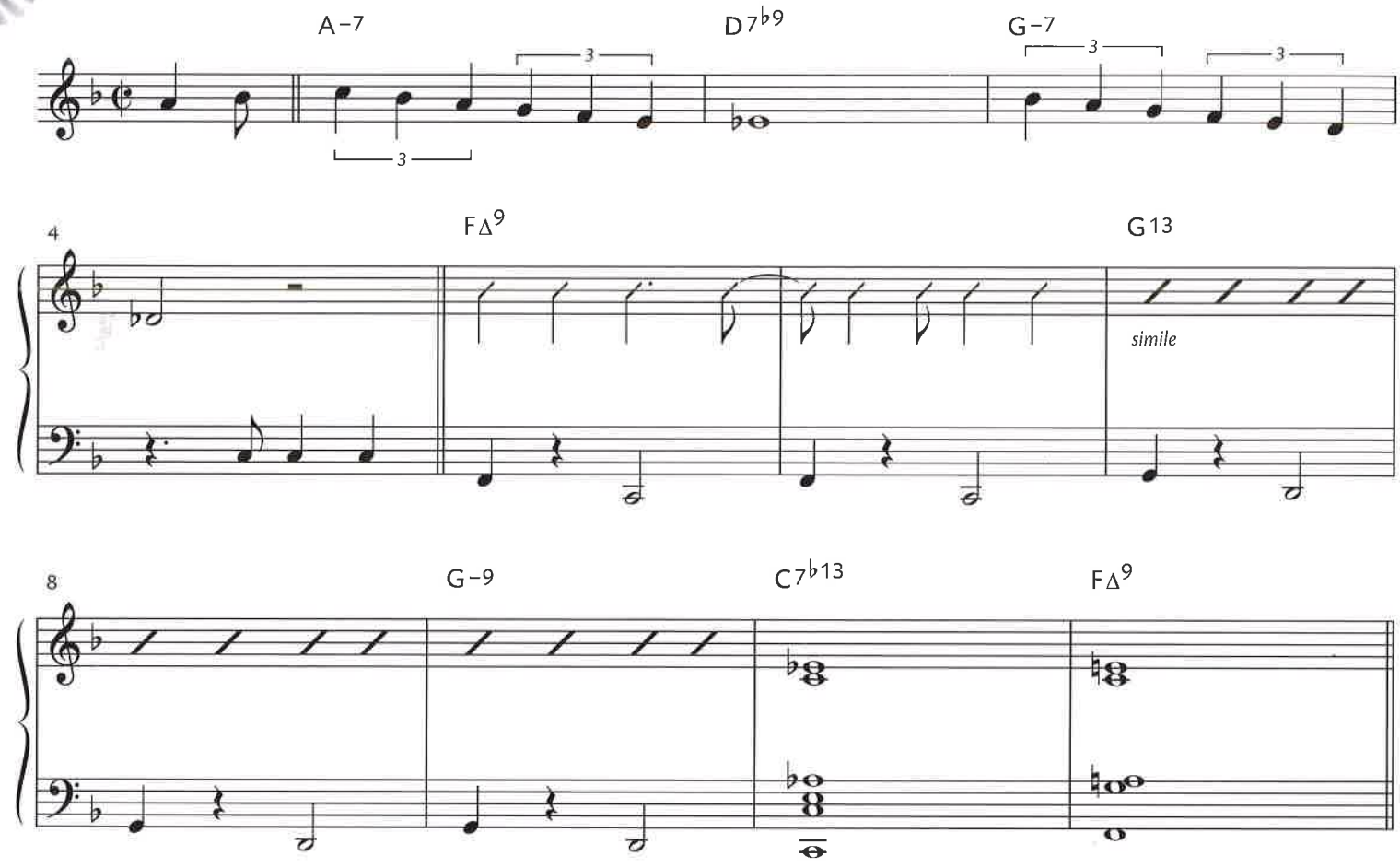


However, its interpretation, when phrasing the Brazilian way, doesn't exactly match what is written. Many times the mother cell is played with a "laid back" interpretation. The mother cell approaches a triplet feeling.

This happens sometimes on breaks like the one found below in a variation of a very popular Brazilian Bossa Nova song:

TRACK 24

EXAMPLE 23 – LAID BACK AS TRIPLETS IN BRAZILIAN SONGS



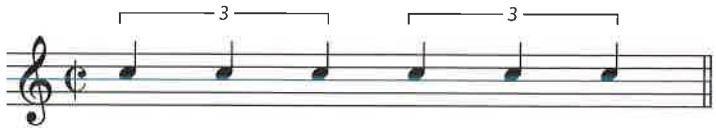
So, as we have seen, an exaggeratedly laid back interpretation can become a triplet.

It is good to know here that the mother cell is very much present in Baião as well as in Choro. And, of course, in Samba and/or Bossa Nova, as already demonstrated in the previous section.

Let's compare it to the performance of a triplet:

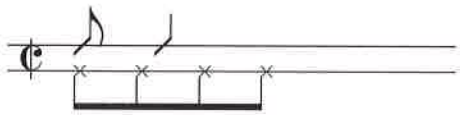
TRACK 19

EXAMPLE 17 – TRIPLETS



Since the second eighth note of the cell should be played with a "laid back" interpretation, it falls a little after the second eighth note.

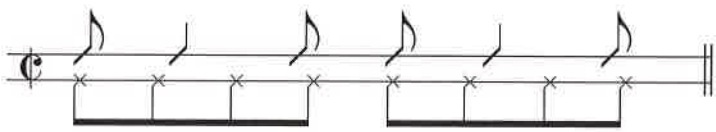
EXAMPLE 18



As a consequence, the third note compensates for that by being played a little before the fourth 8th note.

TRACK

EXAMPLE 19 – MOTHER CELL INTERPRETATION



One can notice in the recorded example(s) how the interpretation can vary. (Note: in the beginning we are demonstrating how it will sound if played exactly on the beat. Then, progressively, we demonstrate its development moving toward its correct interpretation.

Historically, with the first African influences during the 18th century, that cell took its place in our culture. At that time, there was only syncopation within the beat ♪♩♪♪ ♩♪. Later, during the 20th century, by the 1920s, the syncopation had transcended the beat and, consequently, Samba took its own rhythmic characteristics, different from the early batuques.

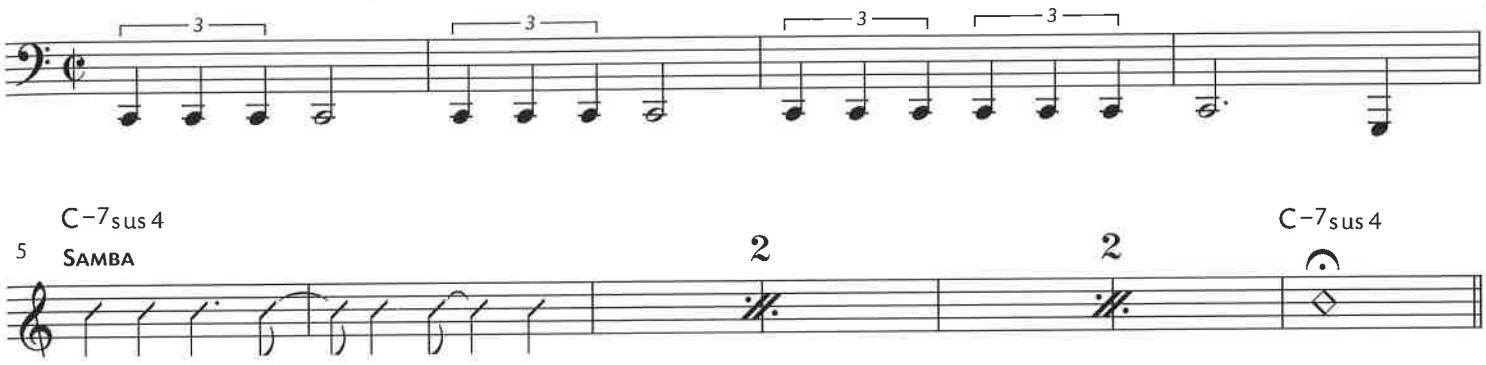
It is interesting to note that the eighth note pulse (basic pulse) and the beat itself remain unaltered.

So one of the secrets of phrasing in Brazilian music in two beats lies in this polyrhythmic phenomenon.

We can experiment singing it in both ways. And we can also notice how fake and graceless it would sound if quantized by a sequencer software.

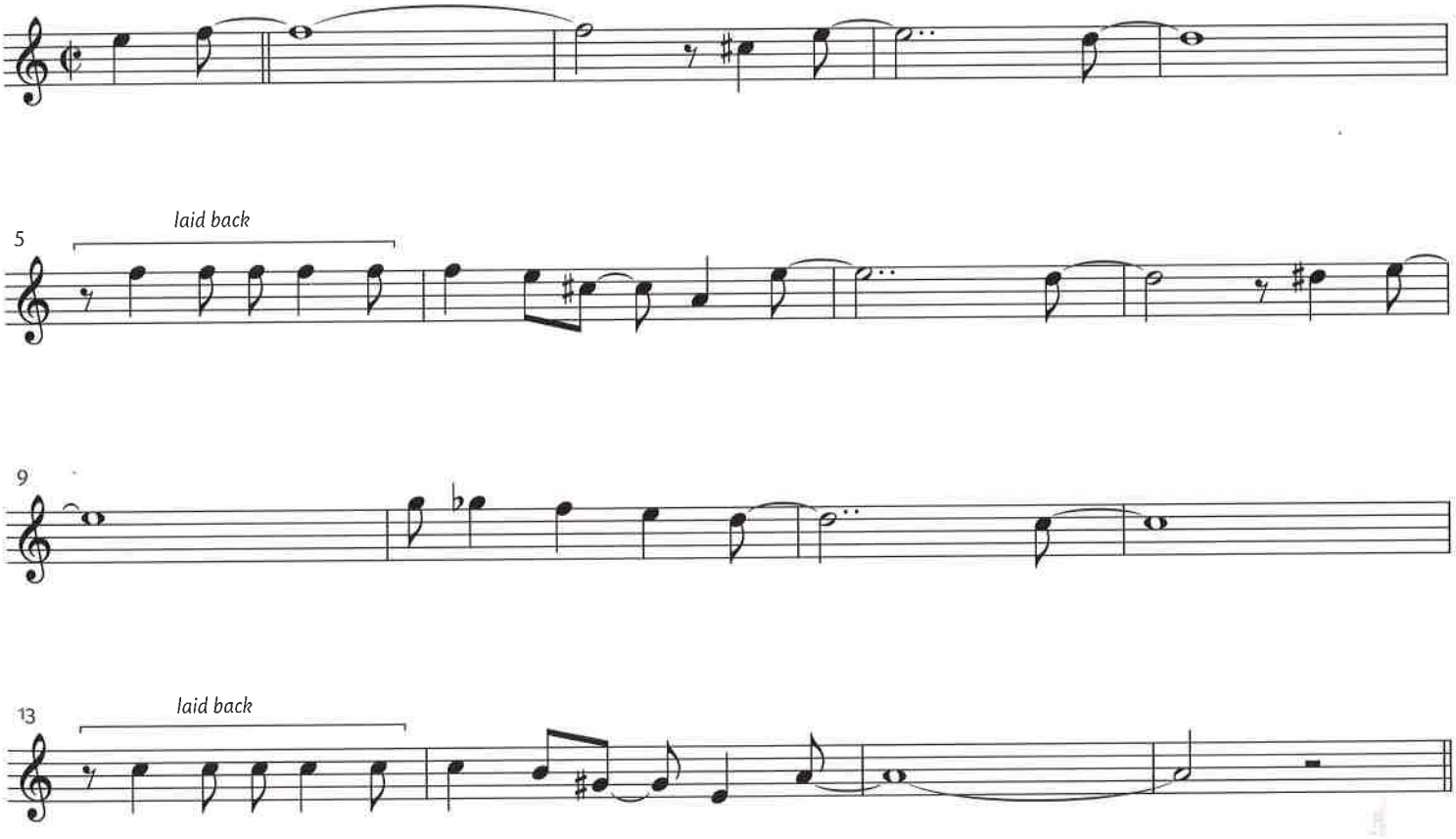
As we mentioned above, the cell can be interpreted differently depending on the situation. For example, in the breaks of the Escolas de Samba, during the big Samba parade, the percussion section nowadays gives it a triplet interpretation. Here it is, played on the piano imitating the break of a Samba school:

Example 20 – Mother Cell Triplet Interpretation – Escola de Samba



Such a "laid back" interpretation occurs even when the mother cell is not "apparently" there:

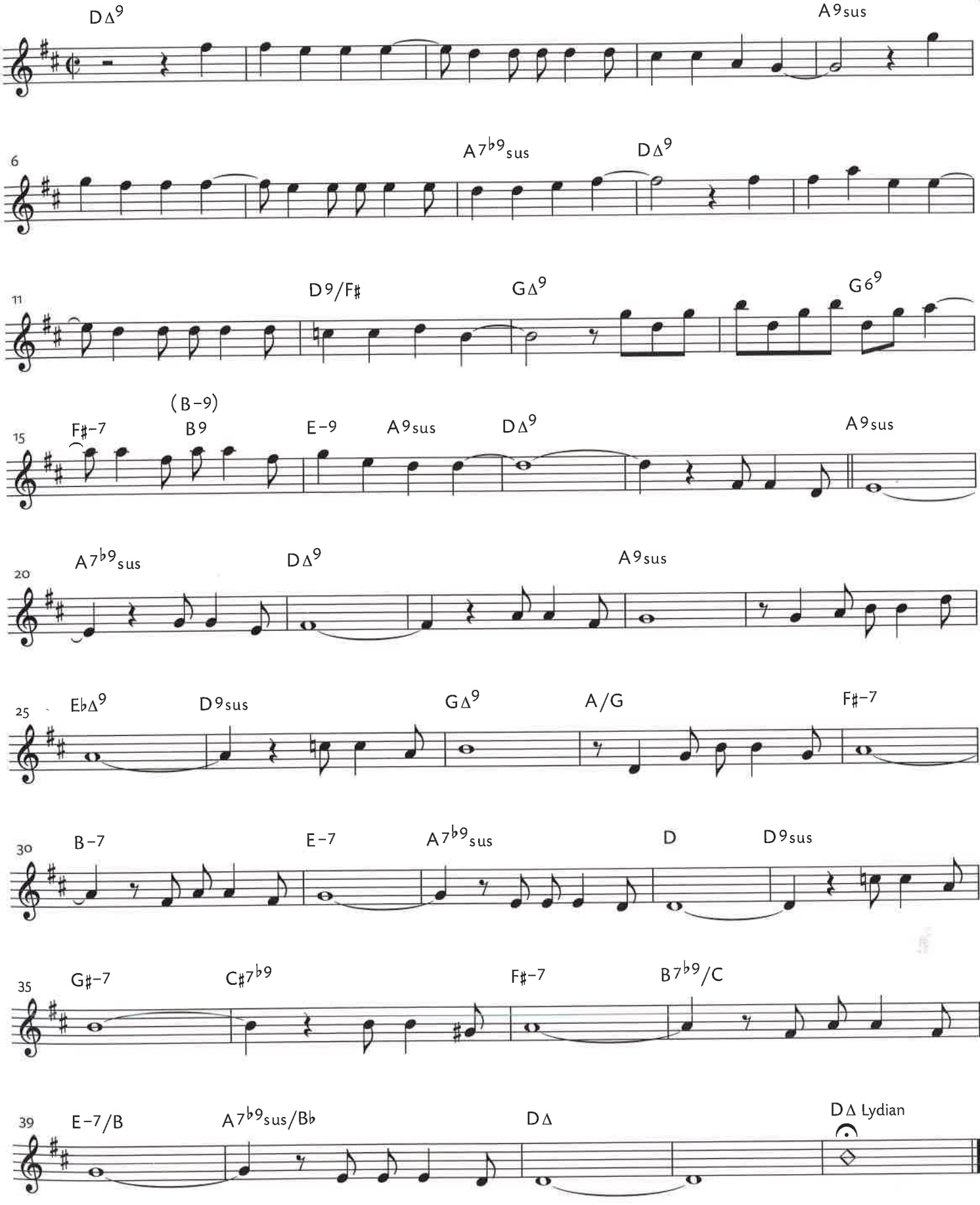
Example 21 – Laid Back Interpretation on *High Partido*, by Antonio Adolfo

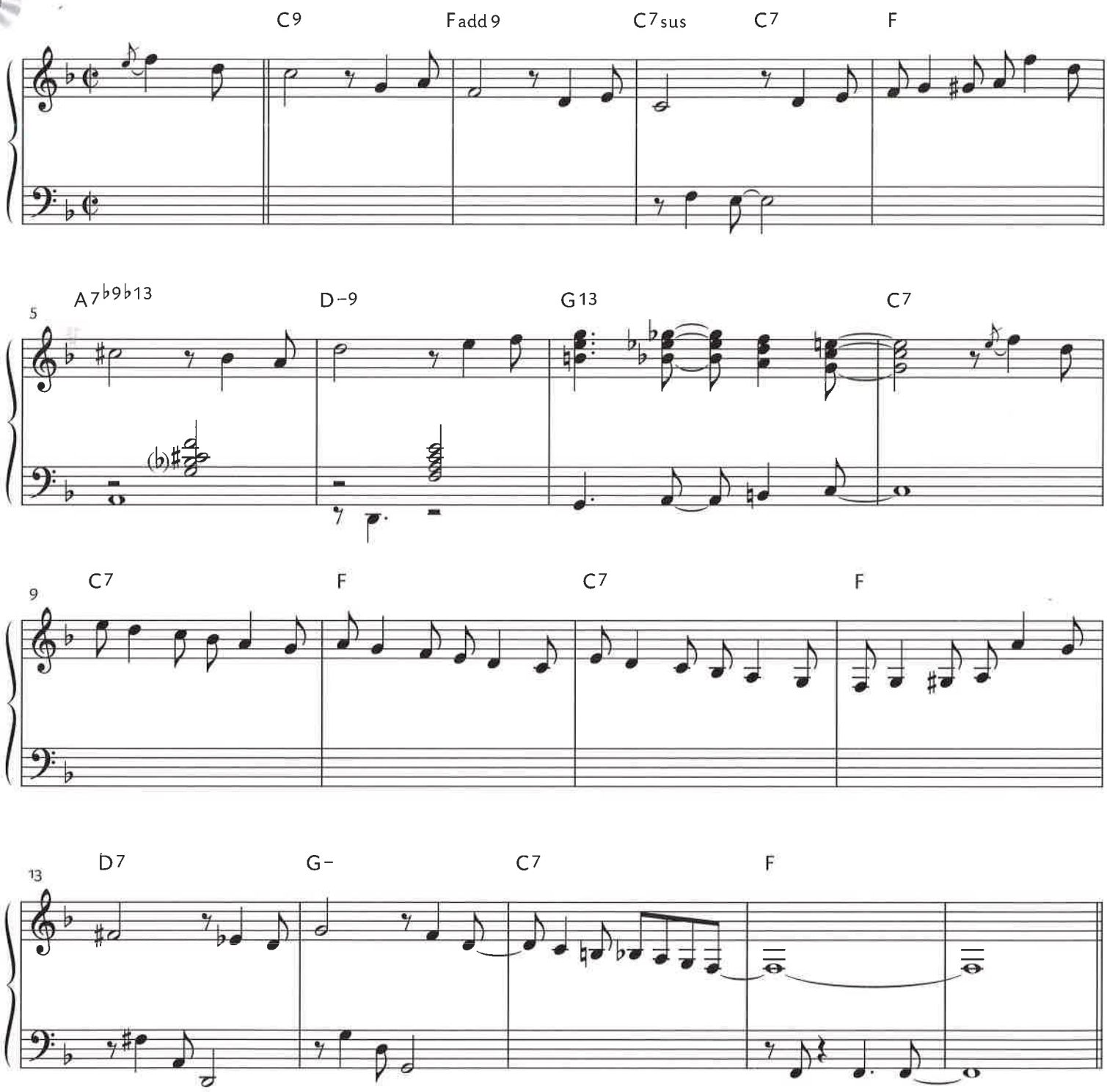


As one can note, the "laid back" style can, on occasion, if somewhat emphasized, be transformed into triplets as shown above and in the example below:

Example 22 – Laid Back Interpretation (Almost Triplets)

Example 24 – Baião (*A volta do sanfoneiro*, by Antonio Adolfo)



TRACK 26

EXAMPLE 25 – CHORO (*ESCORREGANDO*, BY ERNESTO NAZARETH, PUBLIC DOMAIN)